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STORIA D'UN RAGAZZO EBREO



(STORY OF A JEWISH BOY).

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STORY OF A JEWISH BOY

STORY OF A JEWISH BOY

Introduction and background notes by Simi Berman

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
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PART ONE

STORY OF A JEWISH BOY	5
MERANO-BOLZANO	

PART TWO

CLOSE CALL IN PERUGIA	37
---------------------------------	----

PART THREE

CINECITTA-ROME	39
--------------------------	----

PART FOUR

AMERICA	57
-------------------	----

In this community, the Bermanns were an important family. Leo's great-grandfather, Josef Bermann, had been brought to Merano from Kremsier, Moravia, to be the ritual slaughterer (shochet) there. His son, Leo's grandfather, Maximillian, became a doctor and opened the sanitorium, Waldpark, to which people came from all over Europe to take the famed grape cure. It was based on the patient's eating half a pound of the blue hard-skinned grapes from the surrounding vineyards three times a day for four to six weeks during September and October.

Here, Anna Tuch, Leo's mother, a strikingly beautiful young woman from Lvov, Poland, came to Merano with her mother, after the death of her father, to take the cure. At Waldpark she met Siegfried (Friedl) Bermann, Dr. Bermann's sophisticated and debonair son, who had studied soil agronomy at the University of Perugia with the intention of becoming a pioneer in Palestine. Anna and Friedl fell in love and became engaged. Friedl wanted Anna to go with him to Palestine but Anna was not prepared to do this so he went alone. When he returned a year later, they were married, though his interest in her had already cooled while he was away. After the marriage, Friedl and Anna lived at Waldpark along with Friedl's parents, brothers and sister.

Leo's brother Raffaele was born in 1929, Leo in 1931. Their first six years were spent in the cushioned environment of their grandfather's sanitorium, The garden, however, was Leo's own private Eden, luxuriant and secure. He climbed its fig trees, plucked its apples, and lost himself among the roses, tall grasses and other vegetation. He was a playful and athletic boy who loved to run and ride his bicycle up and down the hills around the sanitorium.

Growing up surrounded by those mountains, learning to know them from the many hikes he took with his father along their craggy reaches, he developed a love of high places that stayed with him throughout his life, shaping his weltanschauung. His father taught him that it is best to walk slowly and steadily; that way you could walk for long distances without getting tired. He remembered seeing the world from up above and how it made him feel the vastness of nature and the unimportance of small things down below. All his life he felt happiest walking in the mountains.

Raffaele (Ralfi) on the other hand, at the age of four, was placed in a clinic in Rapallo, on the Italian Riviera, to be treated for an inflammation of the lining of the lungs, never fully recovering his health and strength. One illness led to another; typhus, then tuberculosis of the bone. He was thus an invalid from an early age.

In 1935, Friedl Bermann took the family from Merano to Milan where he opened a chemical factory for the manufacture of detergent. Things had already begun to deteriorate, both in the marriage and with respect to the situation of the Jews in Italy.

During the next seven years, Mussolini's policy turned more aggressively racist as his alliance with Hitler strengthened. The edict of 1938, among other restrictions, both forbade Jews from attending schools and Jewish teachers from teaching in them. Leo had had one year of school, from the ages of six to seven in Milan before this edict was enacted.

In 1939, with a sense of impending disaster and a growing distancing of himself from his wife and sons, Friedl Bermann sailed for America. His delay in sending tickets for Anna, Raffaele and Leo resulted in their standing on the shore as the ship, The Rex, that they were to have taken, departed without them. One can easily imagine the sense of abandonment and loss of hope that they must have felt.

Anna decided to go back to Merano with the boys; it was a place where she knew people and had personal resources. Though by now Merano was not safe for Jews, they were nevertheless able to remain there in relative safety until September 8, 1943. On that day, as described by Leo in his account, everything changed dramatically. When the Badoglio government, an interim government that had come to power after the fall of Mussolini, called for an armistice with the Allies, the hopes of all who had suffered during the fascist regime were raised. Instead, the German army swiftly took over, unleashing all its fury upon everything in its retreating path, including its former allies, the Italians.

It was at this time that the first transport of Jews from Italy (27 individuals from, as it happens, the Merano/Bolzano area) was deported and sent to concentration camps. A division of the German army was instantly assigned to secure the Alto Adige or South Tyrol region with the firm intention of keeping it in German hands. From this point on, it therefore was

a place of extreme danger for Jews, and Anna had to use all her wits to try to save her family by getting them out of there quickly.

Because of Raffaele's illness, Anna's first thought was to get the family to Bologna, to the Rizzoli Institute, a hospital specializing in diseases of the bone. It was going to be a difficult and risky task to move him from one place to another as he was unable to walk and had to be carried by stretcher.

Not only would they be conspicuous, but they would require a certain amount of good will from those whom they were trying to hide from. But they managed to do it as Leo tells us in his story:

STORY OF A JEWISH BOY

I

SEPTEMBER 8TH, 1943!

This is a very distant date by now, but to me it seems only a few days ago.

It was a beautiful September day, one of those days that give the heart a sense of peace, but it was also a day that made the heart of many thousands of Italians bleed; many of these wounds have not yet healed.

September 8th! This date marks the tragic beginning of a terrible odyssey for many people, and so it was for us.

In the afternoon of that tragic day, I was in the garden of the house where I lived with my mother and my brother Raffaele. I was busy negotiating the exchange of some comic books with a school-mate. He suggested that we go to his house, which wasn't very far away, so that he could give me some illustrated albums in exchange for the comic books.

I agreed because I had nothing to do until my mother's return; she had gone to visit Raffaele in the hospital and therefore wouldn't be back for a couple of hours.

After having said goodbye to the friends who were with us, we started walking downhill.

My friend and I were halfway there when we heard a voice shouting behind us, "Do you know what happened?!" We turned around and saw some children we knew in the garden of a nearby house.

That boy who had been the first to speak asked us again, "But don't you know that the armistice has been made with the English? They announced it on the radio a little while ago."

The news was so unexpected that neither I nor my friend believed it, and so we walked away, sure that those little boys were trying to make fun of us. I simply said, "If it were true, it would be a wonderful thing," and then we didn't say any more about it.

A little later we arrived at the house where my friend lived, and he handed me the albums that he had promised me.

While we were talking, his mother came home and my friend told her about what we had heard in the street. The mother then said: "It's a strange thing, because I too heard something of the kind."

Soon after, I took my leave and went down to the street in order to go home. As I was walking, I thought again about what I had heard about the armistice, and in the end agreed that some of it might even be true. I made many conjectures as to what might happen if the hostilities had really ceased: in my thoughts I saw a tranquil life for myself in the future.

I certainly could not have imagined what really had happened. Thus I arrived at the house where I lived immersed in thought.

The idea of that armistice that I so wished for was so fixed in my head that I approached the window of a neighbor who lived on the ground floor and who owned a radio; right at that moment, he leaned out of the windowsill, and I asked him if he had heard on the radio if there were any news. He confirmed what I already knew.

I climbed the stairs and entered my house; I got myself an apple and began to read a comic book. After about an hour, the doorbell rang, and I imagined that it must be mother; while I went to open the door, I prepared myself to give her the good news. As I had imagined, it was in fact mother, coming back from the hospital where Raffaele was being taken care of. I said to her right away, "Do you know that the armistice has been declared?"

Instead of showing surprise as I had imagined, mother answered in an indifferent tone, "Yes, I know." During dinner, we barely spoke about that event.

II

I WOKE UP AT DAWN; it seemed to me to be the dawn of a new and better life. Two hours later, I had to partially change my mind: in fact, a new life was beginning, but not a better one.

After consuming a frugal breakfast, I went out with mother to visit my brother. When we were about to turn into the street in front of the hospital, I noticed something unusual; in fact, under the trees, there was a row of German tanks, as long as the entire street. We didn't know what had happened, but after we returned from the visit to Ralfi, we met an acquaintance who explained it to us. He told us that immediately after the armistice, the Germans had crossed the frontier and entered Italy; here, they had occupied the city and disarmed the Italian soldiers. He also told us that we had to leave Merano, because here all of the local Jews were known to the population, and so the SS would soon come to forcibly remove us from our house. We then asked him where he was going, but not even he had a destination.

After having received this less than joyful news, mother and I returned home.

While I was in the tram going to Maia Alta¹, I noticed some things that previously I hadn't observed: quite a few civilians armed with muskets were walking on the street. An Italian who was near me explained that those guns had been taken away from Italian soldiers and given by the Germans to the local Nazis. The curious thing was that almost all of them carried three or four muskets on their shoulders.

At a tram stop right in the middle of the Corso, there was a little scuffle inside the car. This is what had happened: a civilian armed with a rifle wanted to search the suitcase of an Italian man who had arrived just at that moment with the train; that Italian, completely frightened, tried to protest, and so the German snatched his suitcase and got off the tram. The owner of the suitcase also got off, and said that he wanted to go to city court to clear up the matter. Naturally the German didn't want to hear about it, because

¹ Maia Alta: (obermais in German) a leafy residential district of Merano on the south side of the Passer torrent.

he knew that he was wrong. I don't know how that affair ended up, because the tram was already starting to depart.

From the surrounding mountains one heard periodically the shots of a machine gun: it was a battalion of Italian riflemen who did not want to surrender to the Germans. In the evening I learned that those valorous men had been forced to surrender and that the Germans had penned them up in cattle wagons in order to deport them to Germany.

The tram had already almost arrived at Maia Alta, when I saw in the street an Italian soldier between two German civilians armed with three guns. The Germans carried him to their commander; that soldier had taken refuge in the mountains, but he had been taken by those two who were now leading him. As soon as he looked as if he was going to stop, one of the guardians pushed him on with his gun. Many Italian soldiers could have saved themselves from imprisonment by fleeing to the mountains, but they were hunted down by the local civilians who were familiar with the area, and who continued to search for them.

When we had gotten off the tram and were walking home, we met the Marchese Negroni, who was an acquaintance of ours. We asked him if he could perhaps give us advice on some way of leaving Merano in the shortest possible time; he suggested that we go to a boarding school in Turin headed by priests, and he said to us: "Maybe they will be able to help you in some way." We spoke a little while longer, and then mother said to him that if we were to leave today or tomorrow, we would leave him the keys of our house. He found no objection to this. After this, we took our leave, and he said to us that he would come by in the evening in order to find out whether we had come upon some way to leave.

Without returning home, we immediately went to the Palazzo Hotel, where the boarding school that the Marchese Negroni had mentioned was located. Mother asked to speak to the director, but he was not around, and so the reverend with whom my mother had spoken asked us to wait in the vestibule. We thus sat down in some armchairs, and awaited the return of the director, who had gone on an outing with some of the students.

After having waited about half an hour, we saw a band of students and certain priests enter. A few minutes later, we were received by the director. Mother explained our situation to him clearly and asked him whether he might be able to offer some help; he listened carefully then said to us: "I would very much like to help you, but I am afraid that it will not be that easy. Were it a question of just your son, the matter wouldn't be so difficult, because one of these days we are going to send the boys of this boarding school to Turin, and he could go with them under the pretext of being a student. For your sick son it is certainly not possible, because should the cars be stopped and checked by the Germans, there would be no pretext to explain his presence with us. For you Madame, it would be somewhat difficult, but if you were to dress up as a nun, it would be possible. I believe that the only feasible thing would be to leave your son here in the hospital, and then have him join you by means of an ambulance from Turin, considering that in Merano it is impossible to obtain one."

Mother explained to him that this was not possible, because she would absolutely never leave Ralfi in Merano. After this, we kindly thanked the director, and left the Palazzo Hotel.

At first, we thought we could go home, but since it was already 12:50, and hence too late to begin cooking lunch, we decided to eat in a restaurant that was close by.

After having consumed a less-than-abundant repast, we went home. On the way, we ran into the Bonomi family's son, who was passing by on his bicycle; we asked him where his family was going, and he answered that they would be leaving by train for the outskirts of Bologna. Mother and I were very surprised that the railroads were still working, because that gentleman we'd run into in the morning, near the hospital, had said that the trains were not running for all destinations.

Once we were home, we thought long and hard about what might be the best city to go to. Finally we decided to go to Bologna, because the Istituto Rizzoli was there, which would have been perfect for Ralfi's illness.

Having made this decision, we left to go back to town once again. We had to take care of a few things; first of all make sure that the train was really departing, and in the

case of an affirmative answer, go to Ralfi to inform him of our sudden departure; then buy the tickets for the trip from the C.I.T.².

When we got to the station, we had to wait about ten minutes for the station master, because he was on the phone with Bolzano; when he had finished the communication, he turned to us and told us that the trains were working and that the one for Bologna was leaving the following day at 5:20 in the morning. We then asked him whether it was possible to bring trunks or crates. He said no, it was not.

Having obtained this information, we went to Ralfi. My brother was somewhat surprised to learn about our hurried departure.

We weren't able to linger long with Ralfi, because it was already 5:45 and we still had to go to the C.I.T. to get our tickets, and that office closed at 6:30.

By 6:15, we had already gotten the tickets at the C.I.T., and since we had nothing else to do in the city, we took the tram to go home. In the stretch of road between the tram stop and the building where we lived, we ran into Madame Imlauer, who had an antique store in Merano. We spoke briefly with her, and in this way learned that she too was leaving for Bologna, where she had a niece. Before we said goodbye, we came to the agreement that we would go with her to the train station the following day. Since she had spoken with a porter to carry the luggage, this same fellow could've carried our suitcases as well.

Having arrived at home, we ate a light meal, and soon after having finished, the Marchese Negroni arrived. Mother explained to him what would be the most important things to save. After about an hour, he left, and said that he would come the following day to take the keys and to take us to the station. He also added that he would phone the Red Cross, so that they would send an ambulance to the hospital the following day at 5:10.

² Compagnia Italiano Treno: Italian train company

When the Marchese Negroni left, mother began to put our stuff in the suitcases. We decided that we would bring only two suitcases and a hatbox, because at the station they had told us that we couldn't bring either trunks or crates. After all, we weren't sure that we could bring our suitcases. Mother had to leave many useful things, because they were in the dining room, where we couldn't turn on the lights. I went to sleep while mother stayed up packing.

When I was in bed, I thought again about the events of that day, and the scenes of bullying and cowardice that I had seen that day replayed themselves in my mind.

The moonlight fell onto the floor of the room; every so often, a gunshot broke the nocturnal silence!

What would await us the next day?

III

IT OFTEN HAPPENS to me that when I know I must get up early in the morning, there is no need for me to be woken up, and that actually I get up before the due time. This is how it went on September 10th, the day we had to leave for Bologna at five twenty. I woke up at about four, and with surprise noted that mother had not gone to bed and had stayed up all night packing and preparing the crates that the Marchese Negroni might be able to save at Madame Weinhart's house.

Not long after I had washed and dressed, the Marchese Negroni arrived. I ran to Madame Imlaufer, who did not live so far away, in order to ask whether she and her niece, who accompanied her aunt to Bolzano, were ready.

I found them already prepared to leave, and the porter was carrying their suitcases downstairs. Soon after, we went to our house; I ran to bring the suitcases down. It was not very easy to arrange them on the porter's cart, because Madame Imlaufer had a lot of luggage. When finally everything was ready, we set off towards the station.

The streets were deserted; only some earlybirds could be seen. It was still dark; and the first lights of dawn were barely visible. One could still see a couple of stars. At ten past five, we arrived at the station.

The Marchese Negroni went to the hospital in order to have the administrative office give him the piece of paper with which Ralfi would have been able to leave the hospital. After a few minutes, he ran back, and told us that the ambulance had not yet arrived: we didn't know what to do, because the train was leaving in a few moments. Then mother ran to the station master to beg him to make the train wait a few minutes. Finally the ambulance arrived and Ralfi was put in the train; it was not an easy thing, because Ralfi was in a cast that went from his chest to the ankle of his right leg. A number of maneuverings were necessary in order to put him in the compartment. At thirty minutes past five, the train departed: there had been a ten-minute delay because of Ralfi.

I leaned out of the window: the train was passing the iron bridge over the Passiria River. After a few minutes, it was in the countryside. My eyes bid farewell to Merano. When was I to see my native city again?

The train sped through the orchards; the apple and pear trees bent under the weight of their fruit. On certain trees, there were so many beautiful red apples that there were supports so the branches would not break.

I had always wanted to travel, but on that day I would have rather stayed home. Ralfi also tried to lean out of the window, but every so often he had to lie down because he grew too tired.

Soon we could no longer see Merano, and around us we could see nothing but fields and, a little bit farther off, mountains. Every so often, an early-rising farmer would stop his work to watch the train speed by before his eyes. On the mountains one could see some villages. When was I to see those mountains and those fields again? These questions remained without answers.

An hour after the train had left Merano, the city of Bolzano came into view. In the distance, I could see the rubble of the recent bombing. This was something new for me, since I had never seen an aerial attack, and even less its effects.

The train was by this point close to the bridge over the Adige, when it slowed down to stop at a small station. At the station were some ashen-faced Germans, with pistols and machine guns slung over their shoulders. Two of them boarded the train. Soon word spread that the Germans were searching the train for two Italian soldiers who, in Merano, had escaped the Germans, and whom they thought were on the train.

We were afraid that the Germans would ask us for our documents, because had they done this they would've seen that we were Jewish, and the matter would've ended up badly. Luckily they only had men show their identity cards; nonetheless, I got a chill down my spine when they came into our compartment.

When they had gone, I leaned out the window, and was surprised to see that some Germans were searching under the train for people hiding there or between the train's bumpers. An hour later, the train was finally able to take off again. The Germans hadn't found those Italian soldiers they'd been searching for, but instead found about ten men without valid documentation.

The train went quite slowly over the bridge, because the tracks had just been repaired after the bombing damages.

The train let out a sharp whistle, and pulled into the Bolzano station panting like a dog after a long run.

Before it had stopped, I leaned out of the train car to call a porter. While I lowered the suitcase from the train window, mother went to call the Red Cross militia men, in order to have them take Ralfi off the train on a stretcher. While Ralfi and the suitcases were being led across the tracks to the platform from which the train to Bologna left, mother and I went through the underpass.

When we arrived on the platform, neither Ralfi nor the suitcases were there. However it didn't take long for them to join us.

The train for Bologna, the one that came from the Brenner, normally would not have taken long to come, but the loudspeaker of the station announced that the Brenner-Rome train would have a one-hour delay. We set about waiting patiently. Ralfi tossed about on his stretcher, which was indeed not very soft, while mother sat on a suitcase, given that there were no benches in these surroundings.

I had no inclination to stay put for an hour, so I took a little tour around the station.

I had just stepped away from my family, when a scene that was unworthy of the twentieth century, which according to some people ought to be civilized, appeared before my own brown eyes. It was this: A train composed of sealed box-cars which usually carry luggage, goods and cattle. This time the goods were quite different. In fact, the cars were carrying human freight! It might seem unbelievable but I can assure you that I saw it with my own eyes in the middle of the 20th century. I'll explain with more details. If you have ever seen a box-car, you will recall that it only has one window covered with a thick metal screen. This is the type of freight train I saw. Besides that, the doors were lead-sealed. I realize I haven't told you who those wretched people were, locked up in this way. They were Italian soldiers that the Germans had taken prisoner in their barracks, and now were being deported to death camps.

Besides this, I saw that some people were afraid of the German with the face of a bandit who walked back and forth on the platform in front of the train, and who held a loaded machine gun under his arm like an umbrella or a walking stick.

I asked a bystander why those people clutched the train windows (if they deserve that name), and what those people who hurried toward the box-car were doing. The gentleman kindly explained to me in great detail: "These prisoners are trying to give the addresses of their families so that those kind persons may inform their families of their situation. Furthermore those gentlemen and ladies were also trying to secretly give them apples or a piece of bread (secretly because otherwise that soldier would be more than

willing to make the gift of a bullet in the belly to whomever he saw giving a piece of old bread to one of those poor men who had not eaten for many days)." This gentleman had hardly finished giving me this explanation, when from the train leapt a scream that had in it something tragic, as tragic were the proffered words: "There's a dead person! There's a dead person! Take him away!" The last words had such an imploring tone that all those present were moved by it – all except one person, that is, the German who continued to walk back and forth, unperturbed, rhythmically stamping his hobnailed boots on the stone platform. His heart was certainly hard as that stone.

I returned to where mother was and we were hurrying toward the train windows, on which leaned many of those poor soldiers who were guilty of no crime but that of being Italian. Then these people quickly moved away while I waited impatiently for the train, because I wanted to get away from that place which had, by then, become revolting to me.

After a long two-hour wait, the train finally came. It was not easy to board it.

One couldn't even imagine getting Ralfi on it through the door, since the corridor was so crowded that one could not even pass without a stretcher. So two members of the Red Cross militia got into the train car, and by forcefully elbowing their way succeeded in opening a passage as far as the first compartment, and here they asked some young ladies to kindly get up, because they had to put a sick person there. Having done this, the Red Cross people leaned out of the window and told the other two people who were standing next to Ralfi to lift the stretcher up to the height of the window. It wasn't easy because Ralfi isn't all that light. Besides, there was also the danger that he could fall, because the stretcher was being handed inside at an angle through the window, given that the latter was very narrow. Throughout the operation, mother and I held our breaths. Ralfi was also afraid. The suitcases passed through the same way Ralfi had, and the two of us also entered, but not through the train window.

We had just joined Ralfi in the train car, when the train began to move. The trip was quite monotonous. Every so often, we saw long convoys of German motor vehicles

beaten-up and badly damaged. Upon seeing such wreckage, one immediately understood the horrible losses suffered by the Germans.

We passed Verona and Trento, and toward seven at night we were in the vicinity of Bologna. The region looked completely different from that which we had seen up to this moment. As far as the eye could see, there were no mountains to be seen, and at the end of that endless plain a great red ball, the solar sphere, rapidly descending, descending, descending and finally disappearing as though swallowed by the earth. It was a stirring sight that neither I nor Ralfi had ever seen before. We asked a fellow traveler from Bologna about the bombings, and he gave us some explanations. In addition, he told us that we wouldn't be arriving in the main station but that, on the contrary, the train had to stop in a little station before Bologna because, further on, the tracks were pulled up by the recent air raid. Not long after, in fact, the train slowed down and stopped in front of a station, where before the war surely not even a freight train would have stopped, but now had acquired a certain degree of importance.

Mother got off the train in order to find out whether it was possible to obtain a stretcher. In no time came mother, stretcher, station master, and another man who had offered to help. In that modest station there was even a waiting room, and we went there for the time being. Do not imagine a large elegant room with all the comforts. In that place there were not even the most necessary things. But I want to describe to you, as best I can, this place I am calling a waiting room.

This was a room that, besides its walls, had nothing else. There were a few people who had been waiting for the train for who knows how long. They were sitting on their suitcases, and some of them slept on the floor. The dirty floor was covered in fruit peels, papers and newspapers. We made do as best as we could in a corner that seemed a bit more decent than the rest.

After having settled down in this way, we went to try to find out how we could go with Ralfi to the Istituto Rizzoli. The station master told us that in order to obtain an ambulance, we needed the permission of the German headquarters, which was stationed

quite a few kilometers from the station; he furthermore told us that the curfew at Bologna was 9 p.m., and it was almost that time; although she was afraid, mother thought it best to go to the German headquarters but she had to abandon this thought because the curfew was imminent, and if the Germans saw someone walking around after nine, they didn't think twice before shooting.

We had nearly resigned ourselves to spending the night in that dirty station, but this time again fortune was in our favor. Help came to us in the form of a man who was riding his bicycle to Bologna.

He agreed to go to the German command post to beg the Germans to call an ambulance, so that they could come and pick us up, because only they were able to use the telephone.

This being accomplished, we returned to Ralfi, who was impatiently waiting to know what we had concluded.

We remained for a while longer in that big room, but then we decided to go out, both because there was so much filth, and because that filth did not emit an odor that was pleasing to our nostrils.

With the aid of the station master, I brought Ralfi out into the open air; at first, we were happy enough to be outside, but as soon as it started getting dark, another difficulty befell us, not lesser than that which had induced us to leave the waiting room, and to be precise, those annoying little beasts called "mosquitoes" came and bit us everywhere. Ralfi was the worst off of us all, because, unable to move, he was the favorite prey of those animals. In order to help him swat them away, mother and I took turns fanning a handkerchief in front of his face. When it was mother's turn, I stepped aside to take a little stroll, and I entered the office of the station master: this was a room furnished with few pieces of furniture and one or two framed pictures; in the center of the room, besides the station master, there were other men who were talking amongst themselves. These were some of the Italian soldiers who had fled from the army on September 8th, the day of the armistice. They were in civilian garb given to them by the peasants so they could

flee unobserved. During the day, they stayed hidden in the fields, and at night they walked on foot in order to rejoin their families in northern Italy. They were eating some grapes that they had stolen during the day in the fields in order to alleviate their hunger. They offered me a bunch, and I accepted it and brought some of it to mother and Ralfi.

After a while, in the station master's room, those men were about to leave. I thought: who knows if they will return? Maybe they will end up like those wretched men I had seen at the Bolzano station. In my heart, I wished them to return safe and sound to their families.

After they left, I paced up and down in the station, when at a certain moment I heard the sound of a car approaching. As soon as it came around the corner, I could see it clearly. It was a German car coming right up to the station. A vague sense of fear came upon me, because I thought that maybe they were looking for us. The car stopped almost in front of me and three German soldiers and one Italian interpreter got off.

As I had suspected, they asked for the sick boy, and I answered the interpreter that I would immediately call mother. After a while I returned with mother; she was quite frightened. The interpreter told her that they wanted to take Ralfi to the Istituto Forlanini with their car. Mother answered them in Italian (because she did not want to show them that she knew German) that this was not possible because an ambulance was necessary. The interpreter translated mother's words for the Germans. Then the sergeant, with whom the interpreter had spoken, said that they wanted to administer an injection. When mother heard these words, even before the interpreter had translated them, she grew pale; I was amazed by this, but right away I realized the reason, and in fact mother had grown pale when she had heard that they wanted to administer an injection to Ralfi, because in Merano it had been rumored that in Germany the Germans injected sick Jews with poison in order to get rid of them. The Germans with whom we spoke certainly did not intend to administer an injection of this sort, but mother's fear for Ralfi had led her to see things as worse than they actually were. She in fact immediately began to say that there was no need for this, because Ralfi's was not an illness he had

suffered during the trip, but was a long-standing illness. While speaking, she said a few words in German, and I feared that she might betray herself, but luckily mother quickly calmed herself and showed the Germans that Ralfi was in a cast, and that an ambulance was necessary. They left and promised they would call the Italian Red Cross so that they would bring an ambulance.

When finally the roar of the car moved away, mother and I breathed a sigh of relief.

A few hours passed, and we thought that the Germans hadn't phoned the Red Cross, and we were resigned to spending the night in the station, when around about midnight, we heard the sound of a car. I ran out to see, and in fact a car was approaching. When it was quite close to the station, I recognized that it was an ambulance. I immediately imagined that it was coming for us, and in fact I had not been deceived. A doctor got out of the cab and asked to see the sick person; I brought him near to my brother.

A little later, the doctor, myself and the nurse, carried Ralfi to the ambulance, and we put him onto the stretcher, and mother and I took a seat beside him. Soon after, the car was racing on the road towards Bologna.

The road was lit up by the full moon.

We were already on the outskirts of the city when an "Alt" resounded, and the car stopped. I looked out of the narrow window, and saw some Germans, with their machine guns poised, stationed at the fork in the road. It was a check point at the entrance of the city. As soon as the soldiers saw the Red Cross vehicle, they immediately let it pass; the trip continued without further interruption until the Istituto Rizzoli. Having arrived in front of the large building, the car stopped in front of a large door, and the driver honked his horn. Some minutes passed, and finally the door opened without a sound, and the car entered a large room. As soon as it had stopped, I got off and looked around this place that was new for me.

The place where we had entered was an enormous room, as high as the whole building, and the vaulted ceiling was supported by four gigantic columns. Mother too got off and went towards the doorman, who was standing behind a semicircular table in a corner of the room.

The doorman called the on-call doctor, and mother explained to him Ralfi's disease. That doctor then called for a nurse, asking her to bring a stretcher with her; furthermore, he asked what room with three beds was free. Once he had heard her answer, he went to see Ralfi.

In the meantime, a nurse came with a stretcher. It was a stretcher mounted on four wheels, such that one person alone could carry him. When Ralfi was placed atop it, and mother had paid the driver of the ambulance, the nurse led us to the elevator. I thought that it wasn't possible to enter the elevator with the stretcher, but when the elevator opened, I saw that I had been mistaken; in fact this elevator was so large that two beds could comfortably fit inside of it. We went down to the first floor and walked down a long, large corridor; having arrived at the end, we took a right down another corridor, and entered the fifth room on the left. This was quite a large room, with three beds on which there were only mattresses. The nurse who had accompanied us went to get the blankets. When she returned, we were surprised that she hadn't brought the sheets.

She told us that this night we needed to do without them because the person in charge of the hospital linen was not at work that day. This organization surprised us quite a bit.

As soon as the nurse had made the bed, Ralfi was put in bed, and soon both mother and myself followed suit.

Before falling asleep, for a long time I thought about everything that had happened during the day.

What unforeseen change had taken place in our habitual life.

That sad day was the beginning of a chain of other horrible days.

IV

NOTWITHSTANDING the fact that I had gone to sleep so late, I awoke at around eight thirty.

While still half asleep, I saw the sun's rays on the floor, filtering through the half-closed blinds.

At first, I thought that I was still in my little room in Merano. It seemed as if I had only dreamed of many strange and awful things. But soon, this fog cleared itself from my eyes and my mind. Only then did I realize that I hadn't dreamed, but instead had lived that which I thought was a terrible dream.

Mother too was already awake and it didn't take long for Ralfi to awaken.

Once I had gotten up and washed myself, because breakfast had not yet been brought, I went into the garden. I went down in the large elevator, and when I was down in the lobby, I asked a nurse which way I should go in order to get into the garden. Having gotten directions, I exited from a large door and found myself in an enclosed garden surrounded by the hospital building. There were some paths surrounded by flower beds, that had clearly not been tended for quite a long time. Walking along one of those paths, which was slightly larger than the rest, I immediately arrived at another large door, parallel to the one I had come out of. Having passed through this one, I found myself in the garden. It was a large park.

On the borders and in the center there were some gigantic pine trees. In the center, was a large flower bed, which at one time must have been covered with green grass and sweet-smelling flowers, and was now trodden and unkempt. A few people were lying down on reclining chairs to sun themselves, because it was a beautiful day. Other people walked with crutches on the gravel.

I walked a little bit and stopped in a small semicircular esplanade surrounded by chestnut trees.

There were two benches on either side and a wooden bench on the side of the escarpment. On the bench on the right a man was sunning himself. I have just said that there was a small slope, surrounded by dry chestnut leaves; a boy was gathering horse chestnuts that the wind had shaken from the trees. Every so often, he shook a low branch with a stick in order to make other chestnuts fall.

At the end of that small escarpment, the paved street led to Bologna.

At that moment, the Topolino³ of a doctor passed quickly by, because it had a red cross on the back window. In those days, Germans confiscated all of the cars, and let only doctors keep them. Raising my eyes, I saw Bologna's glorious panorama. From the point where I was, I could dominate the city's entirety with my gaze.

It seemed as though "La Dotta"⁴ was waking right then; the sun was breaking up the morning fog and shone on the large white buildings. The massive structure of the Gothic duomo towered above the city's other buildings. I could also clearly see the two towers of the Asinelli.

A large white edifice caught my eyes; because I couldn't tell what it was, I asked the person who was seated on the bench. He told me that that modern white building was the headquarters of the newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino*.

I looked a little longer at the vista, and then retraced my steps. Instead of immediately returning to the room, I took a stroll about the park once more. On one side of the garden, I came to a slight elevation of the ground, and I walked up a few stone steps. In that place, there were some greenhouses, and a gardener who was transplanting some small plants.

I realized that I had stayed a bit too long and thus I decided to return. But instead of retracing my steps from whence I had come, I went around the building and entered through the main door.

When I arrived at our room, breakfast had already been brought and mother and Ralfi had already begun to eat.

Mother told me that we were moving to another room, bigger and sunnier.

³ Topolino: "Little Mouse": nickname for the first Fiat 500, so called because it was one of the smallest cars in the world. In production 1937 to 1955.

⁴ "La Dotta," The learned: nickname for Bologna's university, the oldest in Europe.

Having finished breakfast we immediately started moving out.

Our new room was opposite the other and the window was overlooking the small courtyard through which I had passed while I was going to the garden.

Mother had just arranged our things a bit when the medical team came around. The head of the Istituto Rizzoli examined Ralfi and told the nurse to have an x-ray taken; he also said that the cast which had been made at the hospital in Merano was very bad because it was too thick and too heavy, and therefore on the following day they would make a new one.

Once the examination was over and the doctors had left, Ralfi wanted to go into the garden.

A nurse brought a sort of little bed mounted on four wheels and placed Ralfi on it. I myself put him in the elevator and took him to the garden and showed him the panorama of Bologna.

Then at lunchtime, around one, we returned to the room.

During lunch mother and I decided to go to the city in the afternoon to pay a visit to a woman of our acquaintance.

In fact, after the meal we went down. Coming out of the large lobby we crossed the large square in front of the building, and went down about twenty steep steps made of stone, and arrived under a small canopy where other people were also waiting for the bus.

Shortly afterwards a bus went by, but it wasn't going to Bologna. We had to wait until it circled around the square in front of the church, which stood next to the Istituto Rizzoli, and came back afterwards downhill. All of this didn't take longer than five minutes. The trip to the city took about fifteen minutes.

We got off in Piazza Cavour, right in front of the Banca d'Italia.

The street where our acquaintance lived was not very far. In order to get there we had to go down via Farini and then via Barberia.

Piazza Cavour was surrounded by arcades. The vaults were painted with frescoes portraying battle scenes from centuries ago.

Going along via Farini, we could see the damage caused by the latest air raids: torn out and twisted store shutters. Not a pane of glass was intact, at least of those that were there before the bombings, and the new ones were encased in strips of paper, so that the pressure waves would not damage them.

Of a large building there was nothing left save four walls; of the interior there was no trace.

In other parts of the city there were houses that hadn't completely collapsed, and then one could read these words written on a sign planted in the ground: "ATTENTION! DANGER OF COLLAPSE! STAY AWAY!"

The most important road arteries were full of holes caused by fragments of incendiary bombs. The cars proceeded in a "ZIG-ZAG" in order to avoid the holes. The walls of the buildings were blackened by fires. Elsewhere in some corner of the street, there was a heap of rubble, and here also one could read on a piece of wood these laconic words: "ATTENTION! UNEXPLODED BOMB!"

Our acquaintance lived on a little street and I noticed that it had been spared by the bombardment.

At about four we went back to the Istituto. In the meantime Ralfi had had the x-rays taken and they had cut the cast in half. While mother was putting the things that were in the suitcase into the closet, I played checkers with Ralfi.

After dinner I read a book and went to bed early.

V

THE FOLLOWING DAY they made a nice cast for Ralfi, a lot thinner than the one made in the Merano hospital.

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Days went by without anything important happening. I took Ralfi to the garden almost every day.

On the twenty-third of the same month, that is of September, mother left for Merano. Mother had decided this because she wanted to see what had been saved of our things, and to see what could still be saved. I will therefore follow this trip, which by a miracle did not end tragically.

The day before her departure, and precisely on the twenty-second, mother had gone with me to the Stazione centrale (in the meantime the tracks damaged by the air raids had been repaired, and the trains could already reach Bologna directly) to inquire when and at what time the trains to Bolzano were leaving. Having gotten the information she wanted, mother bought a ticket and the following morning at seven thirty she went back to the station to set out on her trip. She had an empty suitcase with her (empty, because mother was hoping to bring back to Bologna some of our things that Marchese Negroni perhaps had managed to salvage).

She immediately boarded the train, although the train was to leave more than an hour and a half later. It was already extremely crowded and one couldn't even think of finding a seat. Those who were seated had certainly been in the train since the night before.

More people were arriving all the time, and soon one stood so cramped that one couldn't move a step.

In those days there was a lot of coming and going because many soldiers had left their uniforms to don civilian clothes when the armistice had broken out, and most of those were trying to rejoin their families.

At the moment of departure there were many people, and in the most unimaginable places, so much so that someone who hasn't seen it would have a hard time believing it.

The people were hanging in bunches from the doors of the cars. Not a few fell during the trip, and those who did not get squashed by the heavy wheels of the train could be called fortunate.

There were also those who sat on the roof with a great risk of suffocating from the smoke or of being electrocuted by high voltage wires.

The most fought-for place was between the bumpers of the cars. If someone sitting in that place lost his balance he could be certain of getting picked up in pieces in between the tracks. In those times railroad accidents happened very often.

But let's finally go back to the main subject of the story. Mother had to get off at the Verona station because the train was going to Milan and not Bolzano. Because that same evening there was no connection for continuing on, mother had to resign herself to spending the night at the Verona station. There was neither a seat on any bench nor in the waiting room, because there were people there who had already been waiting for the train for several days, and therefore she had to sit on the suitcase she had with her and wait for the rising of the day.

The station had a miserable aspect. Exhausted people were lying on the cold asphalt. When the loudspeaker announced the departure or the arrival of a train, the heads of those people would lift up, the better to listen. Then there was a swarming of people hurrying to reach the train cars.

The others sighed with disappointment and then dropped heavily back on their hard beds.

At times those who were going to catch the train would stumble onto those who were lying down, and then a curse could be heard, followed by words of apology.

Finally there appeared on the horizon a clear streak, which grew wider and wider. One by one the stars slowly faded away, and the moon also disappeared to give its place up to the half-hearted morning sun, and for all, the longed-for day came.

Finally the train to Bolzano also arrived, and mother got on it. At Bolzano one had to change trains again, for Merano. At noon mother arrived in this city, the destination of the trip.

As soon as she got off the train car, she saw Signora Gruner (Umlauf) coming towards her, and noticed that her face showed surprise, amazement, and almost fear.

Not for a second could mother have imagined that the cause of this was the mere fact of her appearance. However, from Signora Gruner's words she saw that it was precisely this that was the cause of it.

In fact this is what she said: "Madame, why on earth did you come to Merano? Don't you know that you are risking your life? Don't you know that all the Jews of this city have been deported by the S.S.? If you get caught you can be sure you won't see your children again.

"Listen to me! Catch the first train and leave. I cannot continue speaking with you because if someone speaks with or helps the Jews he gets shot instantly."

"Go back, for God's sake, if you don't want to end up like so many others in the death camps in Poland."

She said this hurriedly and in a whisper, and as soon as she finished she hurried away.

It is difficult, almost impossible, to describe the thoughts that passed through mother's mind after that encounter.

It seemed to her as if everything was falling, everything was collapsing around her. Everything had happened so quickly that she couldn't convince herself of it all.

When she was finally able to organize her thoughts, she started going toward the exit.

At that point it felt as if she had been standing there for hours. She tried to strike a calm attitude, as it seemed to her that everyone's eyes were fixed on her; that everyone would go and betray her.

Thoughts went rapidly through her mind. It seemed to her as if she had been already captured and sealed in a boxcar to be deported. A shiver ran down her spine.

Then she thought about Signora Gruner's words and remembered that Signora Gruner had told her to leave immediately. She then went to the information window and asked when the first train to Bolzano was.

She thus learned that there was one leaving only in the late afternoon, and therefore mother had to spend many hours in Merano. Where should she go?

First she thought of going to Lana, a village near Merano, but soon she abandoned this idea, because along the way she might run into some inhabitant of Merano, and therefore would risk being denounced. Another reason was that she might run into the Germans, who would be likely to ask for her documents.

At the end she decided to hide in a small park to the left of the station. It was a small square space, surrounded by a tall hedge, such that from the outside whoever was inside could not be seen. This garden was almost always little frequented because it was in a sparsely populated neighborhood.

So mother entered and saw that no one was there. She sat down on one of the benches, having left her suitcase at the luggage deposit office of the station.

After sitting for over an hour, she felt the need to move. At first she paced far and wide across the park.

Now and then the silence was pierced by the hoot of a train arriving or departing. Mother sat down again, but soon got up and walked out of the garden through a little street.

A little boy was playing in the middle of the street, making sand cakes. A little further away a woman was sitting on a bench, a bucket and a scraper next to her: evidently she was the nanny of the boy who was playing. This woman was sewing. Mother sat down on the same bench where the woman was sitting.

Time passed but every minute felt like a century. For no one do the hours pass as slowly as for he who waits.

About ten minutes had gone by since mother had sat down when an officer of the Italian army came to sit on the same bench. He appeared to be absorbed in thoughts that were not light. Soon he did not keep them in his mind any longer and started to speak, not directly to the people present, but evidently with the intention of making himself heard by them. In fact he began to talk to himself out loud.

This was his soliloquy: "What terrible times these are! It's an impossible situation! I find myself in an ugly situation. I don't know what to do! Must I present myself to the German headquarters or not."

Perhaps he would have continued, but evidently he was annoyed that no one was paying too much attention to him. In fact in those times everyone had enough of their own troubles on their minds, without listening to those of others. He then turned to my mother and asked her: "Are you from Merano?"

She said she was, but immediately regretted it, because that officer might ask her on what street she lived. He could perhaps be a German spy, she thought. Luckily the officer did not ask her anything else and soon he left. He wasn't a spy at all, but fear had made mother see a non-existent danger, among so many real ones.

Shortly afterwards, however, she ran a really serious risk. In fact a cyclist passed, coming from Lana. Mother recognized him as a well-known Nazi from Merano. He certainly would not hesitate to denounce her to the Germans. Luckily he passed in front of her without seeing her, but mother became as pale as a washed-out rag, and when she saw him turn onto the main road at the end of the street, she sighed with relief.

Not long afterwards she got up and went toward the station. She was walking slowly because the departure was still a long time away. She climbed the large staircases of the station, claimed her suitcase and bought a ticket to Bologna.

As the train was already in the station mother got on it and waited nervously for its departure to Bolzano. Shortly afterwards people started to get in. The station master shouted: "All aboard! The train is leaving." And when all the doors were closed, finally the station master waved the flag and the train let out a long whistle and left puffing.

I won't describe this voyage, but I will only say that once mother had left Bolzano she already felt very relieved.

.....

The train from Verona pulled into the station of Bologna on the morning of September twenty-fifth. Mother got off. She took the trolley car to piazza Cavour, where she should have caught the bus that would have taken her to the Istituto Rizzoli. But on the trolley car she ran into Signora Immlauer's niece.

At first, upon seeing mother, she seemed not to recognize her, but when she was closer to her and realized that it was really she, she looked at mother as one looks at a ghost, a person raised from the dead. Finally she said these words: "Why, Signora Bermann, is it really you?! I cannot quite believe it. We all thought you were dead. A student coming from Merano told us the terrible things that happened in that city, and we thought you had been already deported or shot dead. Come to our house to tell us how you escaped. If I tell people I have seen you alive, I wouldn't be believed."

Mother went home with Signora Immlauer's niece. When she arrived at their house there were new displays of surprise. As much as mother wanted to come back to me and to Ralfi, she was forced to tell all the details of her trip.

Finally at around nine forty-five she took the trolley car, and, once arrived in piazza Cavour, put herself on the tram and here we will leave her for the time being.

VI

DURING MOTHER'S ABSENCE I became acquainted with a few boys who were staying at the Istituto Rizzoli. Some were hospitalized, others were accompanying a sick relative, as was the case with me.

One of those who was hospitalized had a hand that was paralyzed. I asked him how that accident had happened, and he told me his painful adventure. Here it is, briefly explained:

He was a sixteen-year-old boy who lived in a small town near Bari. It was summer. The sea was only a few kilometers away. Every now and then, actually quite often, this boy went swimming. In order to get to the beach, he had to go through a small station.

One beautiful morning, the sky was clear and cloudless; the day promised to be clear and warm. The boy decided to go swimming. He happily took to the dusty road. He arrived at the station. Here the accident happened! While he was crossing the tracks, a long train of cattle cars was shunting to couple up with two detached cars on a dead-end track. He was about to cross precisely that track. At that moment, with a dull clanking noise the train had coupled up with the two cars. If that boy had taken a step forward his body would have been crushed. His right hand instead got mangled between the bumpers.

He screamed. Many people rushed to him. The train was disconnected from the bumpers of the cars. He was taken to the emergency room. The hand was not bleeding, but he could not move it. The nerve no longer worked.

He was taken to the hospital. At the end, after a few months and many experiments without results, he was sent to the Istituto Rizzoli. Here his nerve was operated on. He showed me where he had been cut. There were fourteen stitches. From the wrist almost to the elbow.

Every day he had to undergo light electric shocks on his hand, in order for the nerve to wake up again. Day after day the shocks reached greater intensity. He was already able to move some fingers a bit. In a few days it was to be put in a cast.

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ON THE MORNING of September twenty-fifth, at about nine thirty, I was strolling through the corridors in the company of the boy of whom I have just spoken.

We were speaking of this and that when we were met by a young lady who was staying at the Istituto Rizzoli with her mother, who had a problem with both of her legs.

She turned to my friend, whom she knew, to ask him to go downtown to buy a spool of cotton. He said he would go, and asked me if I wanted to go with him.

I thought for a while, and finally decided to go with him, since I had almost nothing to do, and I wanted to get to know Bologna better. Five minutes later, we were going down the stone steps, and then we were at the trolley stop.

From some people who were waiting we learnt that the uphill trolley had not come yet, and therefore we must wait five minutes. Finally it arrived. Almost noiselessly. It stopped and a few people got off. To my great amazement, I saw mother get off as well. I ran toward her and hugged her.

It was a real surprise for me, as I did not expect her to come back so soon. I apologized to my friend for not being able to go with him, and so, with mother, retraced my way back to Istituto Rizzoli. I took the suitcase she was carrying, and was very surprised that it was empty.

When we arrived in the room, mother hugged and kissed Ralfi, and then started to tell us about her trip. Ralfi and I, while she was telling her story, were dismayed in hearing of the risk run by mother. Every now and then I would interrupt her to ask her a question.

Shortly afterwards I left the room and went down the corridor. When I arrived in front of the large window I leaned out and looked in the garden. It was a clear, limpid day. I could see only some tiny white clouds, which looked like wads of cotton-wool dropped by a mysterious giant during his voyage.

I thought back to mother's trip, and reconstructed in my mind some scenes of her story. I was much absorbed in my thoughts, when my ear perceived the drone of an airplane. I leaned out of the windowsill trying to make out the aircraft. It must have been very high. From the noise it sounded like an American reconnaissance aircraft. Light fog prevented me from seeing it. Some people in the meantime had gathered near the window also trying to make it out. Now and then one could hear that it went farther, and then it returned. Evidently it was circling above Bologna at a very high altitude.

After about ten minutes the noise faded definitely away, and those people were already leaving when a whistle was heard, as if from a siren, but it was similar to a balloon deflating.⁵

Shortly afterwards another whistle was heard, like the preceding one. Some people shouted: "The alarm! The alarm! Let's run to the shelter!" In a second, everyone was running through the corridors. Some were running this way, some that way. Some were running to the shelter, others were going to the rooms downstairs to get the relatives who were unable to walk. A few women were already starting to cry, screaming: "Oh God! Oh God!"

I ran to the room, to mother and Ralfi. I wasn't at all frantic, as so many others were. Perhaps someone reading this would find it hard to believe, but it was really this way because I had never seen nor heard a bombardment; it was quite different at the alarms that followed this one.

When I came into the room, I found Ralfi who was already on the wheelchair. I took the chair and led it out of the room. I pushed it while running. Behind me mother came. The corridor was full of beds and deck-chairs. While I was running I heard the airplanes passing above the Istituto. I reached the elevator. There was some room left in it, and I placed Ralfi inside. I also wanted to get in, with mother, but there was no room. Mother and I ran downstairs. I was running down three steps at a time, and in a moment I arrived in front of the elevator door.

Meanwhile, one could hear the bombs falling. There was a thick hail of shells. The German anti-aircraft artillery was silent. The windows were shaking. People were running downstairs in the direction of the shelter. The noise of the explosions was mixed with the crashing of the beds on the first floor.

Mother and I were waiting for the elevator. The seconds seemed like hours. Terribly frightened, we realized that the elevator wasn't coming at all. In that tragic moment I sensed that something must have happened to the electricity. Without wasting a second, I ran to the first floor. I was climbing the stairs three steps at a time. I had almost arrived

⁵ As we learnt a few days later, it had been precisely a balloon, which had been dropped by American aircraft to warn the population, and deflated in the air.

at the top of the staircase when mother shouted: "Come down! Come down! If we must die, let's die together, come down!"

I told her to stay calm. Other people as well, who had gone through more than one bombardment, shouted at her to keep calm. In the meantime one could hear the dull crash of the shells. The glass panes were shaking. I arrived at the first floor. People were running here and there. The corridor became more and more cluttered with beds. Cries could be heard. A few women and some small children were crying. There was a terrible chaos. When the waves of bombers passed above the building, women took their head in their hands, desperate. Others were praying.

I ran toward the elevator door. I grabbed both handles with my hands, and with all my strength tried to open them. I tried one, two, three times, but the mechanical force was greater than the human. Finally even mother came upstairs.

We finally learnt that they had opened the elevator door from the other side of the corridor. We ran in that direction. We found that the elevator door was wide open, and that the elevator itself was about fifty centimeters lower than the corridor. A few nurses were carrying Ralfi out, and they made him stand. Shortly afterward they pulled out the chair as well and they placed my brother on it. Mother had his blankets handed to her from the elevator, and she covered Ralfi. I took the chair and pushed to the other side of the corridor, where there were already many other beds, as I said before.

I pushed the chair close to the wall, on the side where windows opened onto the large lobby. I looked around. I saw about twenty-five beds lined up next to the wall. Some women were hugging each other and crying. Others, with the rosary in their hand, were praying. There were also some people who were not afraid, and were trying to comfort the others. Mother was also murmuring a prayer. Ralfi kept saying: "Calm! Calm!" but one could tell from his voice that he was more nervous than other people. In this way he was trying to calm himself. Every time a new explosion was heard, there were new tears and more fervent prayers.

I clutched at the windowsill overlooking the large hall and looked down. Some stretchers had been placed against the wall, and the nurses were ready to receive the

wounded. Shortly afterwards the roar of a motor was heard, and a van entered the hall and stopped in the middle.

That van was not from the Red Cross, or from the firefighters, but simply from a private citizen, who, passing through the city just at the moment of the bombardment, picked up a few wounded from the street, put them on the van and took them to the Istituto Rizzoli which was the closest hospital. The most seriously wounded were taken to the operating room.

I remember as if I saw him in front of me today a man who got off the van, sat on a stretcher, took off his hat and was running his fingers in his hair as if to comb it. That man had on his left shoulder a piece of shirt hanging, and forming a round hole. But besides the shirt, a piece of skin was also missing, as well as a piece of flesh. I am not going to describe all the five hundred wounded who were taken to Istituto Rizzoli that day. There were women, children, old people. Many arrived already dead.

The vehicles of the firefighters entered the hall, unloaded the wounded and left again to go get others. Another firefighter vehicle arrived, the driver got off, and I saw him cry. Why is he crying, I wondered, maybe he has been wounded? A few minutes later I had the explanation of his sorrow: I saw another firefighter, covered with blood, being taken out of the cab of the vehicle. When the nurse put a hand on his heart and shook his head, I understood that he was dead. The driver was looking at his companion, who had died next to him while he was going through the city to rescue some wounded persons, and he was sobbing loudly. All the bystanders were moved. I was also moved, very moved.

It is heart-rending to see a man, a soldier, cry. At that moment the horn of a car was heard. He then pulled himself together, got into his vehicle and drove it out to make room for another vehicle with its bleeding load. The body of the firefighter was taken to the morgue. I will not forget, for all of my life, those few minutes, that sobbing firefighter. I would like to praise the firefighters, but I cannot find the words. In fact it is impossible to find them. If a soldier who kills many enemies is called a hero, how should we call one who saves those that someone else is trying to destroy?

The firefighter is the only soldier who saves instead of killing.

VII

MY MOTHER DID NOT want me to see all these wounded people. Now however I realize it was a good thing that I looked.

When all the wounded had been taken, nobody was left in the large hall. There were only the bloodied stretchers pushed up against the wall. On the floor the blood stains were coagulating. I have just said it was a good thing that I looked. Yes, it was a good thing! I will never forget those wounded people, those arms, those legs, broken and bleeding, that flesh torn apart by the bombs. I will never forget that blood coagulating on the marble floor. That blood was a warning. That blood should have been seen by those responsible for the war, but not just by them. Above all it should have been seen by those who perhaps in the near future will want a war.

Then every time they were to look into a mirror they would see written on their forehead with that blood: "Murderer!" Every time they were to wash their hands they would feel that they are stained with the blood I saw flow from hundreds of wounds: and no soap can wash away that blood. If the ministers, the presidents, the kings, want to make war, why don't they kill each other? Who gives them the right to kill women, old people, children?

A doctor passed near us. His coat was red with blood. He was tired, his forehead was dripping sweat. "What a terrible day. Five hundred wounded came: the dead are twenty," he told us. "We have prepared five operating rooms, and we have operated without interruption until now."

An hour later the boy arrived who was going downtown with me when mother arrived. The young lady who had sent him to get the spool of cotton was anxiously waiting for him. Who knows what remorse she would have felt if something had happened to him. He rested a little because he was too upset to speak.

PART TWO

CLOSE CALL IN PERUGIA

AFTER THE TERRORS associated with the bombing of Bologna, described above, Anna felt it was too dangerous for them to remain there.

Not knowing where to turn next, she decided, in desperation, to go to Perugia, an old university town in Umbria, located on a hill halfway between Rome and Florence, where Rodrigo, a favorite old math teacher of her husband's lived. She thought he might be able to help them, but when they arrived, Anna found him in a nursing home and in no position to offer assistance.

All alone now in a strange town, she learned that the Catholic Church was helping Jews get false documents and find places for them to hide from the German Army. Shelter was arranged for them by the Monsignor in one of the church buildings in the small village of Preppo on a nearby hilltop. To help conceal the fact that he was a Jew, Leo became an altar boy and also did other small chores for the parish priest, Don Guido Maccari, such as helping to make pork sausages from a pig that was slaughtered on the premises to provide food for the local inhabitants.

They stayed protected within the compound of the church through early 1945. As the Allied armies advanced northward, the fighting between the retreating Germans and the approaching Allies grew more intense.

Leo could see and hear the shells exploding all around them. One of the shells eventually came very close to hitting the church, making Anna again fear for their lives. She arranged to move the family from the church, an easy target at the center of the village, to a farmhouse a little more removed from the heat of battle.

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The place she chose was a stone farmhouse, one of many properties belonging to a landowner, Signor Belluigi, a fascist, as it turned out, sympathetic to the Germans. One day this man overheard Anna talking to Leo and his brother in German. He immediately became suspicious and reported the fact to the German Kommandant in charge of the area. It didn't occur to him that she might be Jewish. He suspected her of being a spy since she was speaking a language other than Italian. The Germans acted upon this information at once. Taking her into custody, they interrogated her in the middle of an olive grove while the boys were hidden down the road in the house.

The Kommandant had a large saber and the four soldiers with him had rifles.

"We know that you are a spy," said the Kommandant. "and that you understand German."

Anna argued that this was not true. She was not a spy and did not understand German. All the time that this was happening, she was terribly afraid that the boys would be brought out and it would be discovered that they were all Jews.

"Never mind," he said. "It is clear that you are a spy, are guilty and will be shot."

At this point he had his men tie her to an olive tree.

"We offer you the choice of being blindfolded or not," he announced.

"I will not wear a blindfold," said Anna, "I will look you in the eyes until the last second of my life so that you may all feel guilty until the day you die."

The Kommandant lifted his saber and said to his soldiers, "When I bring down my saber, you shoot."

At that moment the thunderous sound of loud bombing was heard. The Kommandant hesitated at the sound. In that second of hesitation a German soldier came running over the hill shouting excitedly, "We must retreat! The Allied soldiers are here! They are only a mile away!"

"You stay here!" the Kommandant said to Anna. "We will be back to get you."

It was a miraculous last-minute rescue from death which none of the family ever forgot.

Leo did not have a chance to write this part of the story, but he told it over and over again

PART THREE

CINECITTA-ROME

IN AUGUST 1944, after the German retreat from Perugia, Anna, Leo and Ralfi managed to get a ride to Rome with a British soldier in the back of a jeep.

When they arrived in the city, Ralfi was placed in a hospital while Leo and his mother, now homeless, went to live in a Displaced Persons camp at Cinecitta, the film studio in Rome that had been turned into a temporary shelter for refugees.

*The Bermanns met many other refugees there, among them Jews from all over Europe, who had survived and found their way to the DP camp in Rome. Stories were exchanged of the terrible ordeals that people had undergone during the course of the war. Leo kept a diary, a day by day account of some of these stories as well as other daily occurrences that were significant to him. He also took this opportunity, at the age of 14, to write *STORY OF A JEWISH BOY*, an account of his experiences of the previous one and a half years.*

After some time spent in the camp, Anna was able to rent an apartment for herself and Leo in Rome. (Ralfi was in a sanatorium nearby.) There, with the help of devoted tutors, the Cristofanis, Leo was able to make up all the schooling he had missed in the previous years.

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LEO'S DIARY - 1945

APRIL 12, 1945
ROME

Uncle Hennek is leaving at 3 o'clock to go to an U.N.R.R.A.⁶ rest home. This home is located on the via Cassia.

Ralfi has been sick for several days, but yesterday he had a very high fever. Mamma is very worried about him. Also Aunt Ada is not feeling well and has a small cough. The trial of Nazi criminals is taking place in Nuremberg. The American prosecutor yesterday has read an extremely secret document with regard to Czechoslovakia. The document shows that the gas to subdue Czechoslovakia had been ready.

MAY 24, 1945
CINECITTA

Yesterday was a day of ugly memories. In the afternoon, photographs of the concentration camps of Buchenwald, Weimar and Dachau were put up in the "bar." I shuddered to think that among those bones could be those of my relatives. At night they showed an even more horrible documentary. One could see living skeletons, mountains of bones, and other scenes impossible to describe. I was speechless during the entire show, thinking how a few men could kill millions of people in cold blood and without distinction. Nothing could be enough punishment for these people. But the thing that made me most angry was that some of these lesser murderers are even here in this camp.

⁶ United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

There was significant evidence against these evil-doers. After some Hungarian women spoke against the Jews, the kitchen staff refused to prepare meals for one or two days if these Nazis did not leave the camp.

MAY 28, 1945
CINECITTA

Yesterday morning we went to the lake at Albano. It is a wonderful place and we had a great time. Coming back, we were lucky to get a ride with a truck from the camp.

I had to stay up until midnight to study, and today I am really tired.

JUNE 4, 1945
CINECITTA

Two minutes ago I noticed Miriam Theriacovski, crying outside. My mother told me that she was crying because she had learnt that her mother had been killed by the despicable Nazis.

I thought how fortunate I am still to have my mother. I also thought how many other children are crying for their mothers, and how many mothers for their children. How mournful this crying is, which can be heard even in this room.

JUNE 5, 1945
CINECITTA

Yesterday five Greek girls arrived from Rhodes who in 1944 had been brought to the camp in Dachau, Germany. They live in the room next to ours. The entire camp talks about them. The things they say are horrible. I will write them down as I heard them. These women have told of how they underwent a daily two-hour session of blows with a stick. Worst of all is that they told of having had to see their parents burn.

Everyone felt great pity for those girls who were helped in many ways here in the camp. They were given enough clothes and some beds. Every day one hears about more Nazi atrocities. **Let us not forget them.**

JUNE 6, 1945
CINECITTA

Tonight when I came back home, I found one of those Jewish women from Greece in our room. This girl had been taken by the SS from Rhodes to Auschwitz. There her parents and sisters were burnt. She was made to work because she wasn't either sick or too thin. The fact is that someone who only had a tiny blemish wasn't taken for work. From Auschwitz they were taken to Dachau in Germany. There she was made to unload pit-coal from train wagons and to cover craters made by bombs. On her arm she had a number branded by the SS.

JUNE 9, 1945
CINECITTA

Today mother is very nervous because we don't have any money and because of Ralfi. Every trifle gets her mad. I try to control myself as best I can, but sometimes nasty words escape me; afterwards I regret it bitterly. I really feel sorry for dear mother. All alone as she is, having to take care of me and Ralfi is certainly not an easy thing.

Here in Rome it is unbearably hot, and even the Egyptians say it is not as hot in their country.

I have a lot of work to do, because on the 25th I must take my exams.

JUNE 12, 1945
ROME

Today I went to visit Ralfi. He looks run down to me. The doctor says that he has influenza. After lunch, he had a fever of 38 degrees (centigrade).

JUNE 13, 1945
CINECITTA

Mother has decided to leave Cinecitta. We are going to Rome to the Pingis. In our room everything is upside down. So this sojourn has ended as well. We arrived in Cinecitta on August 29, 1944. Ten long months. Many things have happened. The war has ended, as well as many other things. My handwriting is not very natural because I am very excited.

JUNE 13, 1945
ROME

We are by now in Rome. We got here about half an hour ago. It's very nice here. There is a bedroom and a dining room; the furniture is brand new. The kitchen is very small but it doesn't matter. One thing that pleases me very much is the bathroom, because at Cinecitta it was really disgusting. I do not regret leaving the camp because it is more comfortable here.

I realize now that today is the 13th. Some people say it's bad luck, but it seems the opposite to me.

JUNE 19, 1945
CINECITTA

It's Sunday today, and since I have finished almost all of my homework, I am very bored. So as not to sit doing nothing, I will write of something that happened during our flight. We were at Brogio, a village of four or five houses near Perugia. It was the 16th or 17th

of June 1944, I don't remember very well.

At about 10 o'clock in the morning we saw a good number of German vehicles arrive, fleeing from the battle front, which was at that time near.

First came two tanks provided with anti-aircraft guns, which however were damaged. Afterwards came several cars and trucks. One of these, and precisely the one which was used as a machine-shop and had a generator in tow, stopped right in front of our house. That very morning the Allied airforce attacked the vehicles and we had a terrible fight because the Spitfire bullets were hailing down all around us. One thing was reassuring to us, another scared us.

JUNE 21, 1945
ROME

The exams are four days away. I must try to pass with an 8 average, otherwise I won't be able to take the "terza media" (eighth grade) exams in September. Dear mother promised that if I do well she'll buy me a stamp album for my stamps. We like it in our new house. In the past few days I have been a little sick to my stomach. When I sit down for a meal I think how nice it would be to eat once with dear father and Ralfino. A really nice foursome. Last night I went for a walk with mother in the streets of Rome. Near here is the club for Jewish soldiers, and from the window the Jewish flag hangs. How beautiful to finally see our flag wave free among all the others.

JULY 4, 1945
ROME

Today I finally took my exams. What a relief. This morning there were the oral exams and it went well. I achieved an 8 average. This afternoon mother gave me 250 lire as a

present for the exam. I bought myself an automatic pencil. These days the electoral campaign is going on in England. Churchill gives several speeches every day. Tomorrow is election day in England.

In Italy as well they have just changed government. Ferruccio Parri has been designated as Prime Minister. In Rome one can see signs of all kinds, such as W IL COMMUNIMO, and W LA DEMOCRAZIA CRISTIANA, and a lot more nonsense. I have noticed that now there are many Brazilians in the city. Ralfi is not cured yet. In my opinion the doctor is a loafer who is simply trying to pocket as much money as possible. Last month he was saying that Ralfi would be well by mid-July, but now he has changed his mind and says that he doesn't know how long the disease will continue.

In Rome the price of goods has gone down considerably, given that a lot is pouring in from Northern Italy.

JULY 9, 1945
ROME

On July 4th I took my exams, which were a huge success. Here are the grades which I learnt yesterday from my teacher: Latin 8, History and Geography 8, Art 8, Math 10. These grades have passed my expectations by a lot. I was particularly happy about math, because getting 10 in junior high school is a very rare event. In about twenty days I will resume studying in order to be able to enter "terza media."

Last night when we came back home, mother and I had a pleasant surprise. Uncle Kuba, mother's brother, had arrived. We had dinner together and this morning he came to have breakfast at our place. He is at present in Austria with the Jewish Brigade.⁷

JULY 15, 1945
ROME

This which I am now writing, if it comes out one day, will be a warning for those who do not want to believe. This is the simple story of one of the many who had been in the concentration camps for five years, tortured by those ferocious beasts, the SS. Calling those monsters ferocious beasts is not enough. Today at the Polish restaurant we met a 19-year-old Polish youth. He did not have a place to stay, and mother took him to our house. The things he told us are almost impossible to retell. If a writer wanted to represent a picture of monstrous facts, he certainly would not be able to write something more horrible. This youth has been left alone in the world, and has had to see with his own eyes his father, mother, sisters and brothers burn. He told us how he saw babies thrown from the third floor, or smashed forcefully against the wall. The most terrible thing he has told is that they castrated eighteen or nineteen-year-old youths. The women were forced to give as much as a liter of their blood to be given to the wounded German soldiers. Life had become so unbearable that one day this youth unbuttoned his shirt and begged an SS to kill him but the soldier answered: "You are still fit for work." If everything were to be told, it would be necessary to write a book, and I hope that such a book will be written. In this way, all this will be brought to light.

⁷ Anna's three brothers had emigrated to Palestine from Poland in the late 1920's. In 1944, the Jewish Brigade Group of the British army was formed which fought under the Zionist flag. It included more than 5,000 volunteers who fought against the Germans in Italy from March 1945 until the end of the war in May 1945. After the German surrender, the Jewish Brigade was stationed along the Italian border with Austria and Yugoslavia. Anna's brothers were in the Brigade.

These monstrous murderers must all die. Should there be another war against Germany, I will be the first one to volunteer, and I won't feel pity for anyone, just as they have done.

After all I have seen and heard, my hatred for this damned people will never cease.

JULY 29, 1945
ROME

A few days ago I started studying again. The exams will be in mid-September. Ralfi has been getting up, and I pray to God to make him recover.

We haven't had any mail from father for a few weeks. His latest letter was sent on June 20th.

Mother has an extremely difficult time bringing food to Ralfi. One must go visit twice a day to bring him lunch and dinner.

Now in England in place of Churchill there is Attlee. Let's hope that they will give us Palestine.

AUGUST 1, 1945
ROME

Last night mother was very sick; she was vomiting and I was able to go to bed only at two in the morning. It's terribly hot.

I have started to write the book "STORY OF A JEWISH BOY."

AUGUST 25, 1945

ROME

On Friday we went to the beach at Nettuno. It is an enchanting place, but how long did it take before we could get an ambulance. We must thank our dear mother because we are now at the beach. By now I have done a lot of swimming, and also rowing, which is good exercise. Today I came back to Rome because I must study a lot, but I believe that in a few days I will go back to the beach. In the meantime, Ralfi is still there.

The rooms we are renting are quite expensive. Room and board is 550 lire a day per person, which means 49,500 lire a month. Ralfi sunbathes on a large terrace. The war in Japan is over, but a civil war broke out in China. When will people in the world not fight each other?

OCTOBER 4, 1945

ROME

I am ill with malaria, but I hope that in a few days I will be cured, thanks to quinine. Ralfi is still at Nettuno, thank God he is in good health. Mother is with me here in Rome.

Until yesterday I was staying at my teacher's because I had to take my exams during this time and at home I could not study well. The family is very kind to me and I will try to reward them in the future.

We have not had any news from father since August 15th. In his latest letter he writes that he has become an American citizen, and that he will try to have us go to America as

soon as possible. Today mother has received two letters from her sister and her Polish brother; they are now staying near Graz in Austria. She also learned that two of her sisters and a brother, together with their children, were killed by the Germans.

This piece of news has saddened mother very much today; she cries continuously, although she tries to hide it from me.

DECEMBER 9, 1945
ROME

With the following decree it is clear that we have to leave our apartment within 6 days, namely before the 11th of this month.

But tomorrow mother will ask her lawyer to contest this. If this fails we hope that some employee, who has been paid by us, will enable us to stay in this apartment indefinitely.

It seems to me that Signora Pingi is too interested in this apartment. My opinion is that she is in cahoots with Signor Carozza to send us away by any means possible so that they can sell the furniture which they can't do while we are here. I think Signor Carozza promised a good sum to send us away. Anyway, Signora Pingi is a very shrewd person. We will see.

(Today a letter arrived from Mr. Safier.) I suggested that mother come to some agreement with father, maybe in the following way: Send the separation contract to someone of mutual trust in America. When we arrive in America this person can give this to father.

The day before yesterday Signor Carozza came. We see that Signora Pingi also lies. She had told us that she didn't have a third key to the apartment but now it appears that

Signor Carozza has a third key.

DECEMBER 11, 1945

ROME

Ralfi is not well. Dr. Marroni drained the pus even from the front where he had pustules before. He also had jaundice. (I believe this has been caused by the upsets that father caused him lately.) Mother is very worried and I don't know how to console her. Tonight I sat at the table and looked at her for a long time. It seems that she has aged at least 10 years in these last weeks. In his last telegram father said he couldn't bring us to America without first having the separation papers. Mother would give them to him if it was sure that father would bring us to America. But this is not very probable. I will explain in more detail.

DECEMBER 15, 1945

ROME

Today I had to admit a bitter fact, that it is much better to be nasty than to do good. If one is nasty, one is respected by everyone, while a good person is stepped on.

The more I think of father, the more I find him despicable. It would be difficult for me to respect him during my lifetime. What he has done has been too base and dirty.

Yesterday, the Officer of Finance (Guardia di Finanza) came to requisition the apartment and the lock will be taken down tomorrow.

DECEMBER 22, 1945

ROME

I was at the cinema a little while ago. A man followed me as soon as I left the house. This is the second time it happened. I would like to know who sends these gentlemen. (I didn't know I had beautiful hair but today that gentleman told me that when I left the house.) I was quite amused to lead him around town a little. When I turned around the gentleman smiled at me and it seems that he made signals to call me. It wasn't the same person who followed me the other time. Now that I think about it, this is the third time. The first time one of the gentlemen invited me to the movies. Of course I refused. This time I don't want to say anything to mother because she could be frightened.

DECEMBER 31, 1945

ROME

At midnight the new year begins.

If I think about the year of which today is the last day, many memories come to my mind. How many people, good and bad, have I met in the year 1945? How many new things have I learned? During this year a great transformation has taken place in me. I have known life from a new angle, but it is a very ugly angle. I have seen how great the goodness can be sometimes in people who are not related to us, and I have also seen how far the evil can sometimes go in people who are close relatives. I have seen how there is no justice in this world, and how useless it is to hope for it. Among the good people I can include the Cristofani family, who without any advantage has tried to help us as much as they were able to. This family includes three people: husband and wife and a

daughter who is a teacher and a secretary in a "ginnàsio." I know her because I have studied privately with her. When mother had to stay at Nettuno with Ralfi, they kept me with them for two months, and when I became ill with malaria, they took care of me better than if I had been their son. My teacher's father is an accountant, and he is as amiable and kind-hearted as he is intelligent. Her mother is a very kind-hearted and gentle person. In short, all this family is...(I cannot find words to express what I would like to say). When mother needed money, they lent us several thousand lire, which mother hasn't yet been able to return to them, but they do not even ask for them, although they need them, because they know that mother cannot return the money to them for the time being. I have not yet met people like this in my life. I will always cherish a good memory of them, not of Signor Alexander though.

Let's now speak of that despicable person, Signor Alexander. He is exactly the opposite of the Cristofani family. In a few words: evil, without scruple, someone who does not hesitate to use any means to attain his aim. He is a criminal in gloves and a top-hat. Behind his smiling face hides a heart like...(as I didn't find words to describe the kindness of the Cristofanis, so do I not find words to describe the evil of this man).

JANUARY 1, 1946 12:15 AM
ROME

We have entered the new year. This is not a happy new year. What will the year 1946 bring us? Will we celebrate the next New Year's Day with father in America? Today Uncle Kuba has arrived from Holland. He has received a one month's leave, but he spent eight days traveling, and another eight days must be taken into account for the return trip, so he will stay here for about two weeks.

Today Uncle Dolek and Aunt Ada moved into a room on via Udine. We will probably leave the apartment the day after tomorrow, and perhaps we will go live near Piazza Bologna.

JANUARY 6, 1946
ROME

Yesterday we moved into a room near Piazza Bologna, on via Polesine 8. Stairs B, Suite 19. Thus we have come to live very near Ralfi. However tonight we are going to get room and board at Signora Maria di Medici, via Udine 30, Stairs B, 48. The cause of this fast change is that mother has gotten sick again with neuralgia in this apartment, because it is very cold, and on the top floor.

On Tuesday I will start school again.

JANUARY 7, 1946
ROME

Tonight we slept in our new room.

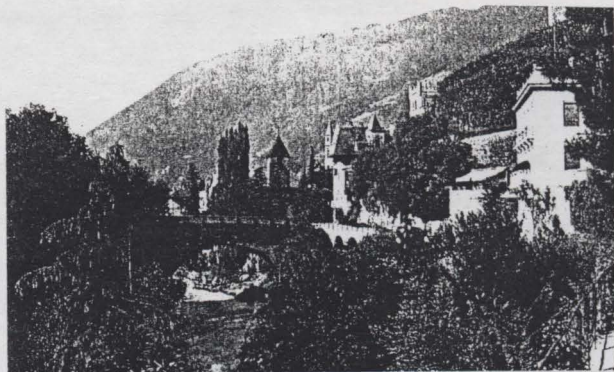
JANUARY 14, 1946
ROME

Yesterday Mother left for Merano with Uncle Kuba.

MERANO



L-R; Leo, Anna & Ralfi 1934



Leo & Friedl 1937



Leo & Ralfi in
Waldpark Garden 1934



Leo & Ralfi, Rome 1945



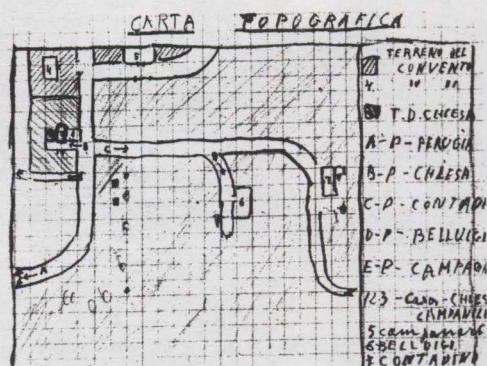
Leo & Anna, Rome 1945



Leo far right, Cinecitta, 1945



Olive Grove in Preppo ("Close Call in Perugia")



Right, Leo's Map of Preppo



Leo, Chantarella 1947



Anna 1947



Leo (2nd from left) in Eilat



Hiking in Blue Ridge Mountains
Army 1951-53;



Leo, center with friends Liz & Ann
Army days Newport News, VA
1952-53



Leo on right - Eilat, 1951



Leo (on left) at the training farm,
Hechalutz Farm, NJ 1955



Leo at the training farm, Hechalutz Farm, NJ 1956



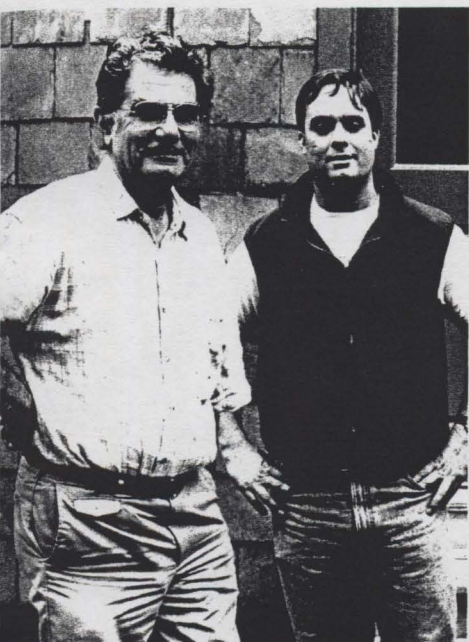
Leo at the training farm, 1955



Leo & Simi at Hechalutz Farm 1956



Tell House - Marlboro, VT 1990's



Leo & Mark at Estey Oran Factory



Leo; Digging foundation at Park
corner at High & Main Street
Brattleboro VT 1990's



Leo gardening at farm,
Chesterfield, NH 1990's



Questo è il volto di un
giovane che non ebbe giovinez-
za, che non sa più se
piangere né ridere, che
la vita ha schiacciato
sotto l'inimane peso
della cruda realtà.
In questa fotografia
tu vedi la maschera d'un
volto; se la maschera
cadrebbe, vedresti
una mente turbata
dalla vita, che troppo
crudelmente si è
accanita contro
tuo figlio.

"This is the face of a boy whose youth was taken from him, who doesn't know anymore how to cry or laugh, that life has crushed under the inhuman weight of cruel reality. In this photograph you see the mask of a face; if that mask were lifted you would see a mind troubled by life, that too cruelly torments your son."

FEBRUARY 10, 1946
ROME

Today is my birthday. I am turning fifteen. Today I cried when I thought about the present situation of my family. We have no news of papa. I find it impossible to believe that a person can have such a hard heart that when he has the possibility of providing a better life for us in America he doesn't do it.

On the back of a photograph he sent to his father when he was 15 were written these words: "This is the face of a boy whose youth was taken from him, who doesn't know anymore how to cry or laugh, that life has crushed under the inhuman weight of cruel reality. In this photograph you see the mask of a face; if that mask were lifted you would see a mind troubled by life, that too cruelly torments your son."

Towards the middle of 1946 Anna decided to return to Merano to wait for further developments. Ralfi was sent to a sanatorium in Leysin. Leo entered middle school there and for the first time began to lead a more normal life.

In 1947, a plane ticket arrived from his father and Leo, the first of the family to leave, flew off to America and the start of a new life.

PART FOUR

AMERICA

IN 1947, LEO ARRIVED in America and went to live in New York City with his father, who lived in a small apartment in Washington Heights with his new wife, Greta, and her daughter, Gaby. For the first half year he attended George Washington, a neighborhood high school, but felt uncomfortable in the crowded living conditions with his father's new family. It was decided that he should go away to Cascadilla, a prep school for Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He did well there, made friends, perfected his English, and after one year, when he was 18, was ready to enter Cornell University⁸.

At Cornell he studied Civil Engineering, learning the science and mathematics involved in building bridges and other complicated structures. For free time activities he joined the Ski Club, (he was an experienced skier from childhood), and the International Folk Dance club run by a German woman named Charlotte Schubert. In addition, he joined a Zionist organization, IZFA (Intercollegiate Zionist Federation of America), where he made many like-minded friends. Ever since his experience in the displaced persons camp after the war, in Cinecitta, Leo had kept alive the idea that he would one day go to live in Israel. In IZFA he met others who felt the same way. Two years after he had entered university, the magnetic pull towards Israel was so strong that he decided to leave his studies and go. He had many relatives there on his mother's side; they had been early settlers from Poland in the 1920's. One cousin who worked for the technical department of the Jewish Agency in Israel was able to arrange for him to work as a surveyor on a project in the Negev, laying the groundwork for the creation of new towns.

In February 1951, he set sail for Israel on an Italian ocean liner. There were many young people on that ship: members of the Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe as well as a group of people from Hashomer Hatzair, a Zionist youth movement. These young Zionists were going to stay for a year on a kibbutz where they would work and learn the language and culture.

⁸ Anna came to America in 1950. She lived on the Lower East Side of N.Y.C. and struggled to maintain herself by painting trays. She had said, during the war, "If I make it through, I will become a religious person." And so she did. Ralfi came over a year after his mother, delayed because of his tuberculosis of the bone. He moved in with his mother at first and later married, fathering two children, Amanda and Michael. He lives today in New Jersey.

Here is an excerpt from a letter he wrote to his mother from the S.S. Atlantic.

FEBRUARY 10, 1951

Dearest Mama,

Today is my birthday and I am twenty years old. My best gift is certainly that I am in the middle of the ocean and traveling towards Israel. Every hour that passes I become more and more convinced that I made the right decision; my heart becomes joyful now that I have achieved my aim and my new life.

It pleases me to think that in the twentieth year of my life I am beginning a new chapter of my existence....

I am really fortunate to be on this ship because there are about sixty boys and girls who are going to Israel. They are really a magnificent group of young people...we sing and dance until three or four at night on the bridge of the boat and there is nothing better than to hear a song accompanied by a guitar under a magnificent starry sky. Besides this we have discussions, lessons in Hebrew etc.

LEO became particularly friendly with one girl, Shoshana, whom he visited on Kibbutz Hazorea during the time they were there.

That year spent on his own in Israel was one of the most joyful times of his life. What a great adventure it was to work in the desert; to mingle with Bedouins in camel markets, to travel around the country, hitchhiking from place to place. The Negev, where he worked as a surveyor, was a bare desert outpost. When they watched movies, an old sheet would be thrown across two buildings as a screen and the whole town would sit there crunching sunflower seeds, spitting out the shells on the ground. There were colorful characters to be met there and Leo met many of them.

The year passed quickly and he had just about decided to stay forever when he received a notice from the draft board in America. He wanted to give up his American citizenship then and there but the Israelis would not support him in this and told him that he had to return to America. When he got back, he was immediately inducted into the army and sent for basic training to Newport News, Virginia.

In the normal course of events he would then have been shipped out to fight in the Korean war, but he was very lucky. He had an ingrown toenail which had become seriously infected and needed to be operated on. While in the hospital, the doctors discovered that he also needed a hernia operation.

When he was released from the hospital, his commanding officer decided that he was not fit for active duty. In fact, the officer in charge had taken an interest in him and enjoyed having him around to make hand-lettered gothic name plates for the officers. He became an authority on dressing for Arctic conditions and traveled to other army bases to give lectures on the subject.

In his free time, he took advantage of the open stacks in the library of William and Mary College. There were miles of books on every imaginable subject and people were free to sit there and read to their heart's content. Leo spent his time reading works of classical literature including the Greek comedies and tragedies. It was there, exploring the Arts and Architecture section of the library, that he developed an interest in Architecture. He thought about going to school to become an architect.

In Virginia, near the army base, he found a place where people came together to do the kind of international folk dancing that he had enjoyed so much at Cornell. By coincidence, it turned out that the same person, Charlotte Schubert, who led the dancing at Cornell, was now organizing the dancing there in Newport News.

Rudolf, Charlotte's husband, had come to America from Germany to work in the cooperative movement. Leo became great friends with them and their sons.

Through them he met other interesting people including an artist couple, Allan and Jean Jones, Liz Morris and her family, and Frances Wright, with all of whom he remained friends for many years after. With this close group and a few others from his army base, he went on hiking trips in the Blue Ridge mountains and spent many other agreeable hours together.

One year at Christmas, their group of dancers went on a trip to Berea College. At this folk school in the mountains of Kentucky, they had a wonderful time meeting singers and dancers from other places. There was Jean Ritchie, the folk singer, Frank Smith, the story teller, May Gadd, who brought the Country Dance Movement to America, and a Danish couple named Bidstrup who taught Danish circle dancing. This experience was an immersion in the "real" America that existed outside of a big city like New York.

All in all, Leo's army experience proved to be broadening. He met many wonderful Americans and got to experience the beauty of a part of the country he might not otherwise have seen. There too he was very much liked and respected.

When his two years in the army were up, he returned to New York City. By this time his mother and brother had come to America and he moved in with them into their small apartment on 13th street on the Lower East side. However, he continued to keep in mind the idea of going back to Israel.

He got in touch with Shoshana, the girl whom he had met on the boat going to Israel in 1951, and joined Hashomer Hatzair, a Zionist movement whose aim was to train pioneers to go and live in Israel on kibbutz. It was in this movement that I met him.

During this time he did many things to prepare himself for life in Israel. He went to night school to learn how to be an electrician and also learned piano tuning. Because he had become interested in architecture, he took two classes in Strength of Materials at Columbia University. He also went to Trade School to learn building construction skills including how to fix plumbing and electrical wiring. He was a careful worker, a fine craftsman, and whatever he put his hand to produced excellent results.

The Zionist organization had a summer camp. One summer, trying out his architectural skills, he designed and built a very special bathhouse with a butterfly roof.

Everyone took turns helping to construct it and all were proud of their handiwork.

Leo was always being sent to this camp to fix things that were continually breaking down. He was in charge of work teams of young people who were sent to help him paint and clean the place to prepare for the camp season. (I met him on one of these projects.)

The leaders of Hashomer Hatzair decided when it was time to send people to Israel. Before they went, they spent some time, usually about a year, at a training farm in Hightstown, N.J.

IN 1955 Leo was sent to Hechalutz Farm in order to learn the different kinds of agricultural work that would be important to know on the kibbutz. (I went at the same time.) We were about 15 people living as a collective unit, gaining hands-on experience in working with chickens and cows, vegetable farming, growing field crops, and also working in the apple orchard. Leo was mainly in charge of planting the field crops which involved intimate knowledge of the machines that did the work. There were tractors, hay-balers, seed drills, harrows, plows and rakes. Leo could fix them all! He sometimes had to tinker with these old rusty contraptions, improvising with ingenuity to make them work again. He would ride high on his tractor, like a prince on his horse, in a faded blue shirt, sun browned and lean, plowing the fields to prepare for planting, then harrowing, raking to smooth out the soil, afterwards planting the seeds that would sprout into alfalfa, timothy, rye, wheat and corn, all of which would be used to feed the cows.

IN 1956, at the end of 14 months on the farm, we got married and in February 1957 sailed off to Israel to live on Kibbutz Nachshon which was situated between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Things didn't work out there. The Israelis who had founded the kibbutz were not easy to live with. So, though we had planned to spend our lives there, after nine months we decided to return to America. Thus began another new life.

Leo immediately enrolled in the School of Architecture at Columbia University. While studying, he had to work to make a living. Among the places he worked during his student days was Jo Mielziner's, a famous stage set designer for Broadway theaters. Leo helped Mielziner make the models for the sets. Wallace Zuckermann, a harpsichord maker, was another person for whom

Leo worked during his student years. While there, Leo invented a do-it-yourself harpsichord kit which sold very well. He also worked in the architectural office of Jan Pokorny, one of his professors.

After Leo graduated from Columbia in 1962 we moved to Roosevelt, N.J., a Greenbelt town inhabited by a large number of artists and writers. Upon graduating, in order to get one's architectural license, it was necessary to work for 3 years for an established architect. He worked for a city planning firm in Hoboken, New Jersey, as well as for an architect, Phil Collins, in Princeton, N.J.

After his apprenticeship was over and he had passed the licensing exam, the first work that he did on his own was designing camps. Camp Design Consultants was the name of his first firm. Through this work he made contacts that proved important for later architectural work he did.

IN 1969 in New York City, he opened a practice with three other architects.

The name of this firm was Berman, Roberts and Scofidio.

That year we moved back to New York City from Roosevelt, N.J., and bought a townhouse on East 91st Street.

At this point Leo became involved in a large project, called an Education Park. He worked closely with sociologist Max Wolf on the design of this project, which was meant to offer the predominantly African American community of East New York a "magnet" school: an educational institution of such high quality that it would also attract non African Americans and therefore create an integrated school.

In addition to this work he was also involved, in the early 70's, with a group of architects known as TATAC. (Architects Technical Assistance Center). These professionals donated their time and skills to communities that couldn't afford to pay consultants, in an attempt to help them create improved living conditions for themselves. In the mid-seventies the group practice split up and Leo continued on his own. Through connections made

during the course of designing summer camps, he got involved in designing ski resort vacation communities. It was because of the many trips to Southern Vermont involved in the design of these resorts that we fell in love with this part of New England. Leo had always loved the mountains from the earliest time of his youth in Italy where the Dolomites were such an important element of his surroundings. Perhaps Wantastiquet Mountain, looming grandly behind the Connecticut River in the town of Brattleboro, Vermont, reminded him of Merano, Italy, the town where he was born.

IN 1968 we bought a farm in Chesterfield, New Hampshire. It had an old farmhouse built in 1782, an enormous barn, and several two-hundred-year-old maples flanking the driveway. Leo said that the maple trees made him feel more rooted: less like a wanderer. In that same year, our son Mark came into our lives. We spent many beautiful summers there among the hills, meadows and woods until finally, in 1980, we picked up stakes, left New York and came to live and work in Chesterfield and Brattleboro, VT, the town just across the river.

BRATTLEBORO is a lively town of handsome 19th century brick and stone buildings that sits on the bank of the Connecticut River. Leo understood that these historic architectural treasures were what gave the townscape its unique character and he worked to preserve the buildings and find new uses for them, often in opposition to other people's desire for tearing down and rebuilding. Later, for his work on behalf of historic preservation, he was given an award by the Society for Historic Preservation.

One of the first things he did on moving his office to Brattleboro was to get some investors to help him buy a large old brick building the Hooker-Dunham Building. Formerly a shoe warehouse, it was transformed by Leo into a building of apartments, offices, studios, stores and a theater used for plays, lectures and concerts. On the outside of the building he made a terrace for sitting and contemplating the quiet flow of the river and the large presence of the mountain.

IN ADDITION TO HIS WORK in historic preservation, he was involved with many projects planning for the town's future. Among the projects that he worked on were the plaza and pathway along the Whetstone Brook, the rebuilding of the Hinsdale bridge, and the creation of a beautiful glass building, called The River Garden, that connects Main Street with the river and serves as a place for community events such as jazz concerts. Over the years he rehabilitated other old buildings in town and created new uses for them. The most spectacular one was the Paramount Building saved from the ashes after it burnt down. Revealed, after the fire, was an old granite facade beneath the 1930's black glass of the movie theater.

He turned an old electric power station into studios overlooking the rushing Whetstone Brook. One of the spaces in it became The National Marionette Theater.

Another project he worked on was the renovation of the Estey Organ Factory.

Because of his continuing concern for the welfare of those who needed help, he offered his talents to the Morningside Shelter, a place where people who were temporarily having difficulties in life could find refuge. He helped to redesign cheerful new spaces in which people could regain hope.

In addition to the work he did for the town, he designed many houses for private individuals. One of the most beautiful was the Tell House in Marlboro, VT.

Leo died in February 2003, two days after his 72nd birthday. Here are some examples of how people remembered him as taken from letters sent to me after his death:

...He was a most unusual and gentle person, very easy to get along with and so brilliant in his social and architectural concepts.

..Missed Leo's presence at the bridge committee meetings - his perspective and his humor - that grin and sparkle in his eyes as he tackled another "ordinary" idea.

..I liked Leo so much...we were on a number of town committees together, planning exciting projects. He had such a quiet, gentle manner, and a wonderful way of interjecting a soft comment that just put perspective on things and pointed to the right direction. And he had the most loving, twinkly smile.

..an addicted worker, a visionary and a huge piece of our life. We loved him. The world is a poorer place without his beauty, talent, intellect and lust for the wonders of the world.

..He was one of the people we admired greatly, someone who contributed much to our community, and who lived out his ideals in his actions.

..One man's vision always seemed to say to me that this man incorporated love of life, and could not rest except for his dreams...I honor him for his magic foreseeing of Downtown Brattleboro, and so many other spiritual endeavors of which he was a part. I would have liked to thank him for his sense of beauty, and his profound view for all people.

Those early extreme experiences had a powerful effect on the man he became. Leo the architect, dreamer, builder, protector, had a passionate interest in Tikkun Olam, the Hebrew expression for "fixing the world." Whether it took the form of repair, restoration and preservation of forgotten old buildings, keeping the past intact while making room for the future, or working within the community, sharing his expertise unstintingly with those needing to improve their lives, he gave of himself freely and equally to everyone. Perhaps the seed for this commitment was rooted in his early initiation to the best and worst in humans that war elicits. Perhaps also, the clear mind and generous heart of the man saw everywhere and always the possibility of renewal and the urgency of remembering.

*Simi Berman
Brattleboro, VT
March 2008*

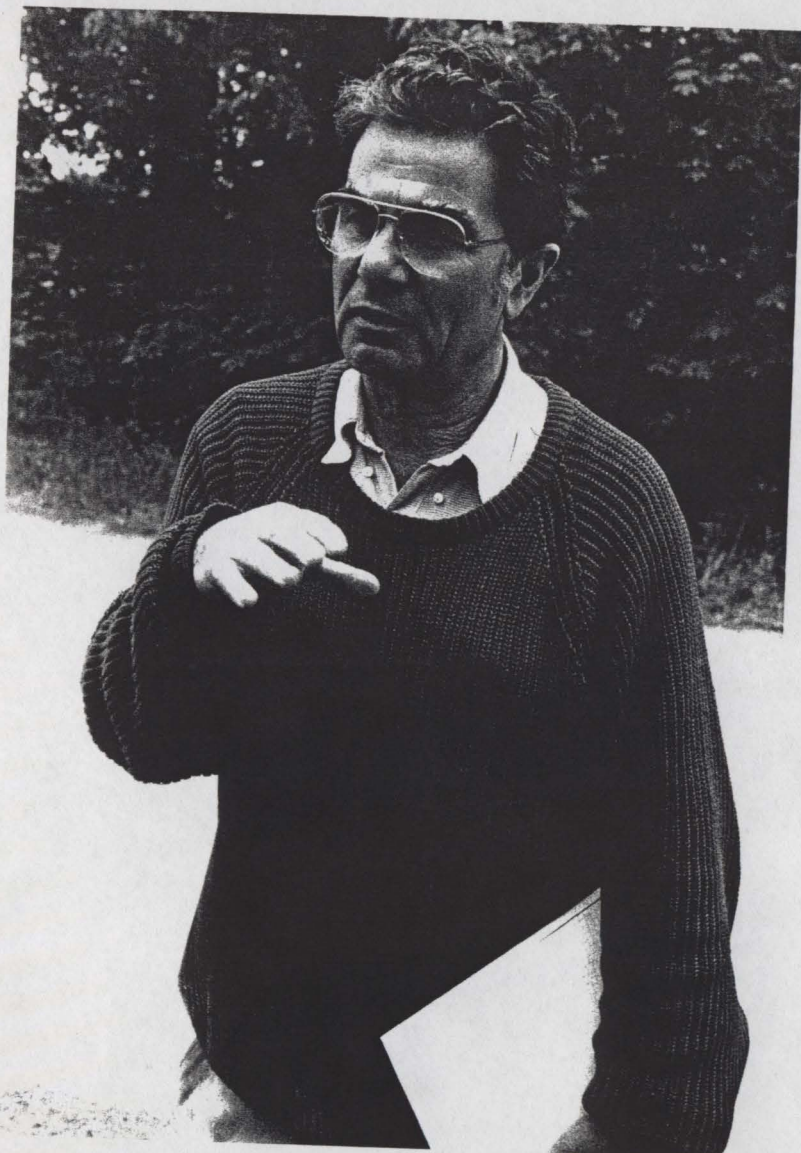


Photo by Bob George

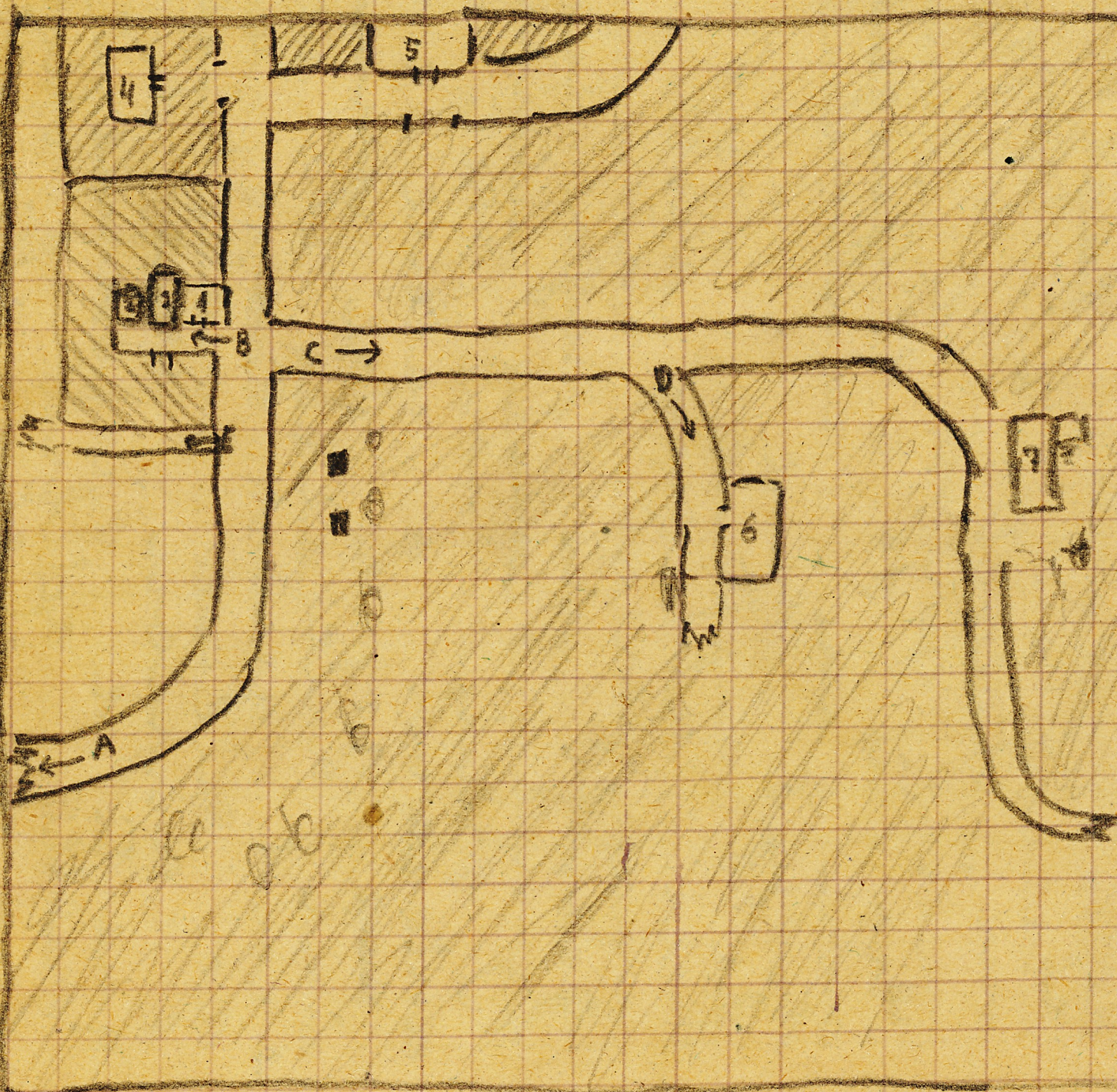
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Simi Berman
Brattleboro, VT
June 2008

CARTA

TOPOGRAFICA



TERRENO DEL
CONVENTO
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T.D. CHIESA

A-P - PERUGIA

B-P - CHIESA

C-P - CONTADINO

D-P - BELLUCCI

E-P - CAMPANO

123 - CADA - CHIESA
CAMPALE

5 CAMPANO

6 BELLUCCI

7 CONTADINO

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TRAMVIE DI BOLZANO E MERANO
 S-BAHNEN BOZEN - MERAN

N. 522

Abbonamento Ridotto
Ermässigte Abbonament

1947

Percorso
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Merano - Maia Alta - Merano - Obermais

Sig.
 Herr.

Bermann Leopold

IL DIRETTORE - DER DIREKTOR

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VII

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XI

FEBBRAIO

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